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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an area of potential research dealing with the role of the school principal as change agent in the school desegregation process. The principal is a key figure in the success or failure of school desegregation. He or she holds the middle position between the school and larger community forces. His position affords him a broader perspective than that of teachers and a better focus than that of the superintendent and school board. The principal can exert effective leadership in the school and in the community when desegregation is called for, even though research shows that principals frequently do not perceive their role as that of change agent. This paper calls for research that would examine the principal's role in school community relations, since there seems to be a general ineptness on the part of most principals in this area. The authors also suggest research on the principal's changing role in the school administrative hierarchy and his role as disciplinarian in the desegregation setting. (Author/DS)

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THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL IN SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

A Position Paper prepared by the Desegregation Studies Staff

National Institute of Education

Department of Health, Education and Welfare

Washington, D.C.

EA 009 744

This paper discusses an area of potential research to be developed by the Desegregation Studies Unit of the National Institute of Education. Its focus is one of assessing the position of the principal within the hierarchial structure of school governance, and more specifically, defining the role of the principal as change agent in the school desegregation process.

The process of school desegregation is one of social change--social change of such magnitude that it must be institutionalized by administrative measures to be truly operational. In studying the process of school desegregation, it becomes necessary to pinpoint the administrative role most centrally involved. Twenty years after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision of Brown v Board of Education, problems related to the initial implementation of the legally mandated desegregation process remain. It comes as no surprise that much of this difficulty can be attributed to the lack of preparation, training, and general readiness of the educational community itself.

There have been principals in the years of desegregation efforts who have deliberately ignored the legal mandate in an effort to block desegregation and injure its effectiveness when finally implemented. There are others, however, who despite good faith efforts, have failed in peacefully implementing the desegregation process without disruption to the educational process. With the Court in Green v County School Board of New Kent County declaring that a school authority's remedial plan and dis-

tricts court's remedial decision were to be judged only by their effectiveness, the directive is clearly one of producing results. With the onset of resegregation, that expanded command is to produce lasting change.

Theoretically the principal should play a critical role as change agent because of his exposure to the daily operational consequences of desegregation and his middle-man position between the school site and larger community forces. His position affords him broader perspective than that of teachers and better focus than the superintendent and school board. He is removed from the day to day classroom experience but nevertheless, he is in a position to witness the impact upon the children of any particular policies, practices, or procedures.[1]

Very little attention in the desegregation literature has been devoted to examining the role of the principal as opposed to that of the superintendent or school board. The dearth of information in this area might be explained in two ways. First, the desegregation process, whether voluntarily undertaken or mandated by court order, is viewed as a change in policy. Policy planning and decision making is traditionally an area left to superintendents and school boards and one in which principals themselves and others in the educational arena view principals as significant actors in the desegregation process.

Theoretically one would characterize the principal as the implementer of school board and superintendent developed policy. And, as Sarason has noted, any proposal for change that intends to alter the quality of life in the school depends primarily upon the principal.[2] However,

as he further points out, the principals and other actors perceptions of the system may serve as a basis for inaction or limit the range of possibilities for action thought available.[3] The effects of perceptions of self and the tendancy of principals to view the system as a primary determinate are forces to be reckoned with as expectations and perceptions can and do produce self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, in Foskett's study reviewing group attitudes toward elementary school principals' roles, the findings indicate that principals were least accurate in their assessment of the perceptions and expectations school board members and superintendents had of them. This conflict in role perception reveals a degree of ambiguity in the position of the elementary school principal that might account for their ineffective performance.[4]

A study focusing on role definitions was made of Los Angeles' mandated Advisory Council. The Council is composed of parents, community members, school staff, and students in secondary schools and is charged with the responsibility of assisting school principals implement school board policies. This study suggests that when Council members' expectations for principals differ from those held by principals, potential public challenge to the principals' authority is accentuated.[5]

As Becker, Gerlad, et al noted in their review of problems facing elementary principals, "perhaps the most critical problem faced by the elementary school principal today is the general ambiguity of his position in the educational community. There is no viable, systematic rationale

for the elementary school principal to determine expectations for performance, no criteria exists through which performance can be measured."[7] In view of these studies, examination of the problem should be directed identifying the role of the principal and determining what general personal and professional characteristics are required of an effective school principal. Having defined the principal's role, the issue to be addressed is whether an effective school principal is necessarily an effective change agent in the desegregation setting.

If, as the above studies seem to indicate, principals and others within the hierarchical structure fail to perceive his role as such, then perhaps as Martha Turnage suggests, the pressures of the desegregation process itself is redefining the role of the principal.[8] Her study essentially questions whether as principals experience increases in responsibility they concurrently experience a change in their status, position, and power within the school administration structure. She further questions whether a recognition of this change in power, status, and function by other actors in the school structure is not crucial to the principals' effective implementation of such far reaching policy changes as school desegregation.

Regardless of the conceptual questions of role perceptions, functions, and expectations, the principal's immediate and very practical goal in the desegregating setting is to come into compliance with the law in peacefully implementing the plan developed for his school. The liter-

ature describes several of the tasks involved in attaining this end. The methods and strategies principals employ are varied in an attempt to establish, first, structural and then attitudinal change among the various client-interest groups to be served at the school site. Involved in these changes is what has been described as the "dynamics of leadership-followership" in the process of translating Board of Education policy into education programming. As Sciara notes, "a person may lead, but to be followed, a leader must accept or seem to accept the traditions and norms the group has identified. Effective leadership does not reside solely within the leader himself but also within the sociological milieu created by his followers and the situation."[9] In this sense, the principal needs a working knowledge of the objectives and programs of many organizations and interest groups. He must be able to identify and mobilize the support of those leaders within the formal and informal power structures that back an orderly implementation. What the principal is essentially concerned with is understanding the social dynamics of desegregation in balancing a network of external and internal group interactions.

In its recently released national study of desegregation in the last ten years, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that the level of opposition among local leaders just prior to implementation of desegregation was far greater in districts which reported serious disruption of the educaton process.[10] They further report that 65% of business leaders, 67% of political leaders, and 87% of religious

leaders were supportive or neutral in districts where disruptions occurred. As the Commission report suggests, where leaders are supportive, they actively involve and inform the community. As a result of this involvement, the entire community tends to be more accepting of desegregation.

The school principal will have to establish a strong relationship with community interests including parents, PTAs, Advisory Councils, civic organizations, media, informal and formal power structures, ministerial representatives, police departments, health departments, and juvenile courts.[11] The effective principal, in implementing the desegregation plan for his school will call upon these political and local community leaders to legitimize the legally mandated steps being taken, help ameliorate resistant factions, mediate disputes, coordinate the dissemination of information, incite community participation and support. In such a situation in which administrative educational decisions will undoubtably have a profound impact upon the future of local politics, race relations, business climate, public safety, and the educational process, the principal will have to clearly express to these community elements that it is in their own interest, as well as the public interest, to take part in the peaceful and effective implementation of school desegregation.

While it is to the principal's advantage to include school groups, central school administrators, parents, and community elements in the desegregation process, Turnage's study indicates that the principal's selection of his primary reference for decision making is crucial to success.[12] If, for example, the principal's primary reference is ex-

ternal to the school site, either the other administrative actors or parents and community elements, the school is likely to become the breeding ground for suspicion and mistrust. Turnage has found successful integration(sic) to be directly correlated to the participation of students, teachers, counselors, and staff as primary references to decision making.

The principal must bring a personal sensitivity, openness, and acceptance to the process in dealing with all its many facets. It has in fact been generalized that those principals who have made greatest efforts to recognize their own prejudices have been found to be capable of dealing more effectively with the ambiguities of the process. At the school site, the principal will have to deal with the prejudices, fears and doubts of students, faculty, and staff. These participants will require special preparation and training. The principal will also have to be prepared to face problems of student discipline, faculty assignments, and accomodating extra-curricular activities for incoming student populations. Underrepresentation of minority staff is a problem for which affirmative action policies will undoubtably have to be devised. Eventually, the principal will have to concern himself with potential problems of resegregation in ability grouping and tracking in the classroom and developing alternative teaching methods and curriculum.

Summary

What the desegregation literature indicates comes as no great revelation. Theoretically, the school principal's role in the desegregation process is an important one as facilitator of social change that has been the cause of much argument and conflict. His role may not be significantly altered from a traditional one in one respect. An effective school principal that has served as educational change agent will undoubtably be an effective actor in the desegregation process. For those principals, however, who have not perceived their role or who have not been perceived as agents of change, the transition may be difficult as the transition is one from an administrative position of stabilizing the status quo to a leadership role disruptive of that status quo.

As Cecil Miskel indicated in his report, Public School Principals, Leader Style, Organizational Situation, and Effectiveness, the knowledge of principal effectiveness is deficient in descriptive, explanative, and predicative powers, and a conceptual model for leader effectiveness as a guide to specific procedures in management should be developed.[13] Research efforts should be directed toward establishing some relationship between leader characteristics and varying situations and the effectiveness of principals in dealing with various interest-client groups in the desegregation setting. Turnages work took some steps in this direction in correlating situational factors such as varying racial compositions of student populations, size of school, and status of court proceedings with principal effectiveness in implementing

desegregation. Additional analysis of this sort would give some definition to the rather amorphous role of the school principal and help map out situational conditions necessary for effective implementation of the desegregation process.

Dr. Mark Chesler's work is most impressive in its recognition of the specific and inherent needs of the various groups to be led in the desegregation process.[14] Quite apparent is the fact that leader effectiveness is dependent upon personality as much as the organizational climate and situational factors. Dr. Chesler's work has consciously avoided the academically bankrupt route of simple personality assessment. Additional work of the type and quality of that done by Dr. Chesler should be supported.

Research could be initiated in any one of many areas. For example: an examination of the principal and his role as disciplinarian in the desegregation setting, the principal's changing role in the school administrative hierarchy as a result of the desegregation process, the principal's role as educational leader in training teachers and staff for desegregation, etc. However, in view of the marked expansion of the principal's relationship with larger community forces in the desegregation process and what seems to be a general ineptness on the part of most principals in school-community relations, studies which would examine the principal's role, function, expectations, and effectiveness in community relations seems most deserving of support.

FOOTNOTES

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